



NATIONAL SPONSORSHIP AND NETWORK OFFICE

Network Notes

From the Desk of Dr. Laura Koehl

The beautiful month of May is here and with it the sense of hope that our Easter season has promised. May is certainly a special month for the Sisters of Notre Dame and all who share their mission, as it honors the sisters' patron our Blessed Mother Mary.

In stories highlighted here you will see the many ways our ministries honor the legacy of the sisters through their pursuits of excellence and celebrations of Catholic sisters and Catholic education. We are all part of this great SND story! Every day at each ministry in this network, the SND mission is alive and well in the dedicated service of staff, teachers, and administrators who bring the promise of hope to so many.



As we honor our Blessed Mother Mary this month, we know that she watches over the many transitions that often come at this time of year. Some of those transitions we celebrate -- marking the significant contributions of a beloved staff member or leader. Others may be more difficult and we seek to accept them as Mary did in her own life - with grace and humility.

On April 8, 2026, we lost a dear colleague and friend with the death of Nancy Coonis, an experienced educator and leader, and founding member of our National Ministry Corporation Board. It seems worth noting that Nancy's final day on this earth is also the feast of the death of St. Julie Billiart. We dedicate this newsletter to Nancy and her abiding commitment to the legacy of the Sisters of Notre Dame, the many transitions she shepherded for those she served, and the many ways she brought God's goodness and provident care to all who knew and loved her.



Gratefully,

Laura Koehl, Ed.D.



Spring 2026

CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE

Congratulations to SND National Network Award Recipients



The SND National Network Awards program recognizes and celebrates the outstanding contributions of employees and volunteers in the SND Network for witness to the mission, vision, and charism of the Sisters of Notre Dame. Congratulations to this year's recipients!

Transformative Leadership Award

Recognizes individuals who are catalysts for growth; inspire hearts; and transform lives of those with whom they minister.

Katie Chowdhary, Dean of Students, Lial Catholic School, Whitehouse, OH
Jenna Hittle, Assistant Principal, Julie Billiart School, Akron, OH
Dan Rudski, Former Board Chair, Lial Catholic School, Whitehouse, OH

Gospel Witness Award

Recognizes those who reflect and nurture the Notre Dame charism, spirit and mission within their professional communities and among all they minister.

Erika Elliott, Speech/Language Pathologist, Julie Billiart School, Akron, OH
Patrick O'Brien, Principal, Julie Billiart School, Westlake, OH

Bernard Overberg "Teacher of Teachers" Award

Recognizes educators that demonstrate exceptional, inspirational impact on the formation and professional learning of teachers.

Sarah Allin, Junior High Science Teacher, St. Mary School, Chardon, OH
Linda Flynn, Pre-K Teacher, St. Mary School, Chardon, OH
Kelly Matthias, Begingergarten Teacher, Julie Billiart School, Brecksville, OH

Distinguished Graduate Awards Celebrated

Almost 50 students from over 30 SND Sponsored and Affiliated Schools will be recognized with the SND Distinguished Graduate Award in celebrations this spring. Over 1,350 middle school and high school students have received the DGA since the program began in 1999. For more information, visit the NSNO website award programs page at <https://nsno.sndusa.org/programs/>



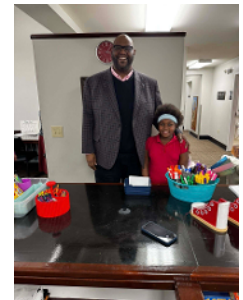
Please share excellence in your ministry by contacting us at nsno@sndusa.org.

CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE

Congratulations to **Julie Billiard School** (Lyndhurst, OH) for receiving the Cassin Prize from The Drexel Fund honoring their expansion from one school with about 125 students to four campuses with approximately 450 students enrolled, all with special needs. The first Julie Billiard school was founded in 1954 by the Sisters of Notre Dame to educate and care for children with unique academic, social and emotional needs. Today, JB students have a variety of learning differences, including autism, ADHD and dyslexia. They come from 75 different school districts across Northeast Ohio. The network has carefully studied and cultivated its academic model and school culture—which it calls the “JB Way”—and developed a strategy for infusing it into each new campus as it expands.



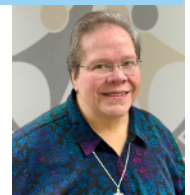
Named in honor of BJ Cassin, a co-founder and longtime chairman of The Drexel Fund, the Cassin Prize celebrates accessible private schools in Drexel's grants portfolio that have pioneered and scaled high-impact educational models with a \$25,000 award that can be used to further their educational mission.



Covington, KY Mayor Ron Washington recently visited the **Notre Dame Urban Education Center** (Covington, KY) and was impressed with the dedication of the staff, volunteers, and supporters. “Under the leadership of Sister Maria Therese and her team, NDUEC is doing incredible work preparing young children for kindergarten through strong early learning and literacy programs,” Mayor Washington said. “I was especially proud to see their partnership with Read Ready Covington, which strengthens reading skills and tracks student progress citywide,” he added. A highlight of his visit was when a student proudly shared that she had read 70 books!

TRANSITIONS

St. Maria Therese Schappert will complete her term as the Executive Director at **Notre Dame Urban Education Center** effective July 1. Following years of service as a teacher and principal, “MT” joined the center in 2019, bringing it through COVID and continuing to grow the resources and services for students and volunteers. She has served the center with tenacity, creativity, innovation, and great love.



Erin Woods, Director of Development at NDUEC since 2020, will be the new Executive Director. Erin has worked closely with Sr. Maria Therese advancing the center by implementing comprehensive fundraising plans that support NDUEC's mission.



TRANSITIONS



After 23 years at Notre Dame Academy (Toledo, OH) and a career in Catholic education spanning more than 40 years, **Mrs. Kim Grilliot** has announced that she will retire at the end of the 2026-2027 academic year. One of the longest serving ministry leaders in our network, Kim has served at NDA as Notre Dame Academy's first lay vice principal and principal, and the first lay president following the presidency of Sr. Mary Ann Culpert, SND.

Kim has led NDA to a new level of distinction, implementing the prestigious International Baccalaureate Diploma Program – the only one in NW Ohio; starting the Junior Academy for grades 7-8 with the planned addition of grade 6 next fall; implementing and securing funding for a 1:1 iPad program for all grades; and partnering with universities to give students more opportunities to earn college credits. Kim will leave behind a strong legacy of leadership and service to the NDA community and our SND mission and heritage. The NDA Board has organized a Presidential Search Committee led by Board Chair Jenny Swope and is conducting a national search for Kim's successor.

Mrs. Jenny Chirico will serve as the principal of Lial Catholic School (Whitehouse, OH) beginning July 1 after serving as part time principal this past year. Jenny has taught at Lial for 26 years serving as a middle school teacher in science, religion, and math. She has led several projects at the school including accreditation, leadership development and celebration of the many Lial traditions. Jenny has been recognized with numerous teaching awards including the Golden Apple Award from the Diocese of Toledo in 2025 and the Sisters of Notre Dame Bernard Overberg "Teacher of Teachers" Award in 2023. She brings exceptional experience, deep faith, and a lifelong love for students to her new role.



It is with great sadness that we share the news that **Nancy Coonis** passed away on April 8. Nancy was a founding member of the National Ministry Corporation Board of Directors in 2021. She served as a liaison to Notre Dame Academy Schools of Los Angeles and the Notre Dame Learning Center Preschool. She brought extensive experience to this role having served as the first lay President of Notre Dame Academy in Los Angeles from 2008 to 2016 and held other prominent leadership roles in Catholic education. Prior to her years at NDA, Nancy served as teacher and then principal of St. Matthias School in Downey, CA. She left that position to become the Superintendent for the Archdiocese of LA. From there Nancy then served as the Executive Director of the Western Catholic Education Association.



Nancy was a woman of many gifts. She was a beautiful singer, a joyful and deeply social person, with a brilliant mind that stayed curious and engaged. She was a woman of deep faith, a strong leader, and someone who embraced life fully. She loved to travel, to connect with others, and most of all, to be with her family and the many friends she held dear. May we honor Nancy's life by embodying the vocation she believed in so deeply: educating, uplifting, and guiding students with faith, courage, and compassion.

MISSION MOMENTS

Srs. Lisa Novak and Donna Paluf led 18 participants from nine sponsored schools, one affiliated school and the SND EKY Foundation in this year's **Charism Experience** held at Bethany Retreat Center in Chardon, OH. Participants shared in presentations, discussions and prayers to gain a deeper understanding of the history, mission, and charism of the Sisters of Notre Dame.



The group enjoyed coffee and a celebration of Mass with the sisters and tours of the SND Center grounds, chapel, and, shown here, the newly completed Heritage Lobby.



Maria Early Learning Center (Toledo, OH) participated in the seventh annual *World Drawing God Day* sponsored by the Children's Ministry Partnership of Boston College. Pope Leo loves to see a child's faith imagination at work in their artistic masterpieces. Students from around the world draw God how they see him and can submit their masterpieces to be considered for the Drawing God Museum 2025 Exhibition, and, of course, to Pope Leo.



Students at **St. John the Evangelist School** (Delphos, OH) partnered across grade levels to decorate prayer rocks with their prayer partners as they prepare for the Lenten season. This meaningful and fun activity encouraged faith, friendship, and reflection as students prayed together and for one another; a beautiful reminder that we grow stronger in faith when we pray together as a school community.



Cleveland Central Catholic High School (Cleveland, OH) celebrated Ash Wednesday Mass by gathering with their St. Stanislaus School (middle school in Cleveland) prayer partners to receive ashes and reflect on the need for God's mercy and grace.



Celebrating Catholic Schools Week



Notre Dame Academy (Toledo, OH) celebrated Catholic Schools week by welcoming the Class of 2030. Fr. Ken McKenna, OSFS, blessed the acceptance packets of the current Notre Dame Junior Academy 8th graders and those who will be joining the high school in the fall.

St. Pius X – St. Matthias Academy (Downey, CA) marked the beginning of Catholic Schools Week with a special Mass celebrated by Bishop Marc Trudeau to acknowledge the priests, deacons, and Sisters of Notre Dame who have deeply molded and impacted PMA's history and present time. They have touched so many lives with their guidance, love, example, and grace.



The entire **Notre Dame Academy** (Los Angeles, CA) community from TK through 12th grade came together for a beautiful Mass in honor of Catholic Schools Week. This sacred tradition unites them in faith, gratitude, and celebration of the strong foundation built by the charism and the mission of the Sisters of Notre Dame, who have shaped their journey. This year also commemorates 75 years of excellence at the high school and 78 years at the elementary school.



Celebrating Catholic Sisters Week



Lial Catholic School (Whitehouse, OH) celebrated the beginning of Catholic Sisters Week and International Women's Day by recognizing the strength, faith, and quiet leadership of women who shape our world, including Lial's past SND principals pictured here: Sister Mary Corneille, Sister Mary Cyrilla, Sister Mary Jesse, Sister Kathleen Marie (formerly Mary Madelen), Sister Margaret Mary, and Sister Patricia Marie McClain. Lial was founded through the vision, courage, and devotion of the Sisters of Notre Dame, whose mission continues to guide the "Little School in the Woods."

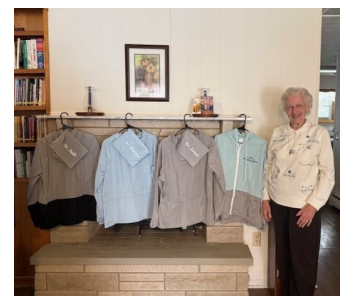
Notre Dame Cathedral Latin School (Chardon, OH) celebrated the sisters by presenting flowers to Sr. Michelle, Sr. Emilia, and Sr. Joanne as a small token of their gratitude for the faith, joy, leadership, and steady presence they bring to the NDCL community.



Notre Dame Elementary and Middle School (Chardon, OH) celebrated the week with intergenerational experiences with Sisters of Notre Dame that included Sr. Lisa Novak meeting with 7th and 8th graders to share the international history and charm of the SNDs; K-8 students made bookmarks for the sisters; 6th graders made beautiful cards for the health care unit; and eighth graders that are active in Campus Ministry visited, made bracelets, enjoyed cake and played saint trivia with the sisters. The celebration culminated in a tea with the sisters that work in the school.



SND EKY Foundation (Morehead, KY) celebrated the week by gifting the sisters a humorous card, gift cards and raincoats with the SND EKY Foundation logo.



Notre Dame Academy (Toledo, OH) celebrated Catholic Sisters Week with the theme *Stories of Hope and Heart*, highlighting the spirit, service, and strength of Catholic sisters with stories of personal and communal impact. In honor of the 175th anniversary of SND and the jubilee year Pilgrims of Hope, SNDs were invited to share their stories of hope and heart in short videos. [Click here to view them.](#)



Resources

Coming Up!

6/7-11

Rural Healthcare Student
Experience

Morehead, KY

10/1

SND Foundation Day

10/28-30

Sponsored Ministry Annual
Gathering

Chardon, OH



In honor of the 175th anniversary of the Sisters of Notre Dame and the jubilee year Pilgrims of Hope, sisters were invited to share their stories of hope and heart in videos. Click here to view their stories.

May 13th is the anniversary of the beatification of St. Julie Billiart in 1906 by Pope Pius X. The process involved a rigorous examination of her holy life, miracles, and the enduring impact of her educational work for poor children, culminating in her canonization by Pope Paul VI in 1969.

The most oft-quoted prayer or motto of St. Julie Billiart is

"How good is the good God!" or "Oh, qu'il est bon, le bon Dieu!."

This simple phrase summarized her spirituality and was constantly on her lips, reflecting her deep trust in God's goodness despite her long paralysis and hardships.



Visit the NSNO website at <https://nsno.sndusa.org> for more resources and information or contact the staff at:

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